Hermeneutics in Films Through The Eminent Perspective of Kuleshov Effect

Author: Nasywa (Von) Ahmad
Publication Date: December 2025 (Republished)

Experience is one of the fundamentals of shaping the outcome of a human, specifically artists. It encapsulates fragments of narratives. These narratives are shaped into personal matters yet at the same time, they are pieces of mosaic that may possibly fit into other pieces. And to shape every artist's experiences into a mosaic that can help to fill the blanks in others' canvases, they turn their stories into a form of art. Now, I will be discussing one of the forms: the portrayal of narratives in films and its process of analysis.

Understanding and analysing films has always been a natural instinct for a human's mind to perform unconsciously. When one tries to delve deep into the messages that are being portrayed in films, the mind categorises its effort to analyse in different manners. One of the most well known sets to approach is the mode of *Hermeneutics* (the opposite of *Poetics*). At its core, Hermeneutics, comes from the Greek word *Hermeneuo* which means translate or or interpret. Therefore, it is a theory and method of interpreting texts. Hermeneutics was originally used for biblical interpretations. It has been later extended to other written texts as well as of verbal and non-verbal communication. Today in addition to religion, Hermeneutics are researched in fields as diverse as law, literature, history, philosophy, art, film & medicine.

To bring this into the realm of film studies, hermeneutics functions as a framework for extracting meaning from moving images. Film interpretation can stimulate theoretical generalisations and supports the development of conceptual models for understanding narrative, emotion, ideology and as well as representation. The philosophy of film grounded in the natural world has been especially prominent among cognitive film theorists such as *David Bordwell, Noël Carroll, and Gregory Currie*. They emphasise the conscious mental processing of viewers and the way audiences actively infer narrative emotional motivation and thematic meaning. This cognitive approach stands in contrast to classical psychoanalytic and ideological film theories that emphasises unconscious processes and deep structures of desire. Other schools approach cinema through pragmatism. They draw from thinkers such as *William James*, as well as from those influenced by *Wittgenstein's* hermeneutic tradition where meaning is understood through use, context, and shared forms of life.

A fascinating diverse tradition leads to one of the most influential branches within both literary and film analysis is known as the *hermeneutics of suspicion. The term was articulated* by the French philosopher *Paul Ricœur*, who argued that many modern critical approaches can be understood as interpretive dispositions toward answering such questions like, *"what is this work really about beneath its surface?"*

Here, I'm going to break down Ricœur's several dominant interpretive traditions that fall under this suspicious orientation:

- Marxism focuses on class struggle and economic relations
- Psychoanalysis emphasises Oedipal conflict and unconscious desire
- Feminism examines the asymmetry of gender relations
- Post colonial theory highlights the occlusion of imperialism and colonial power

These schools of thought are as influential in film analysis as it is in literary interpretation. And when any of these frameworks is used as a lens to analyse a particular work (a poem, novel or film) the resulting interpretation may be called a *hermeneutic reading*. It is to be believed that such readings are not concerned only

with what a work shows on the surface but with how it functions ideologically and what it unconsciously reveals. This practice often takes the form of what is known as symptomatic reading or symptomatic analysis. It is an interesting method that treats the artwork as a “symptom” of deeper social, political, sexual or economic structures.

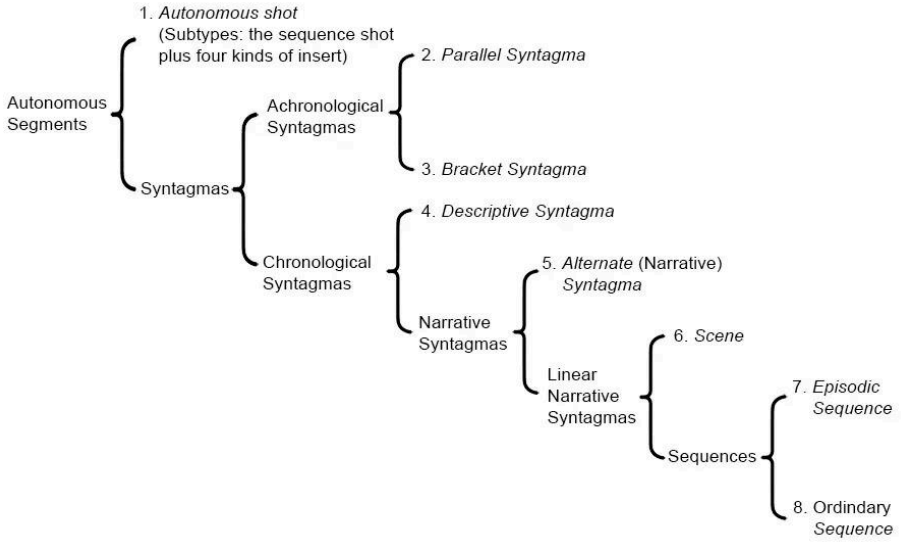
I will now trace the relevance between both hermeneutics and *Kuleshov Effect* and how they coexist. Hermeneutics explains how meaning is interpreted and on the other hand, the Kuleshov Effect explains how cinematic meaning is constructed in the first place. Lev Kuleshov demonstrated that meaning in film does not reside in individual images but emerges through juxtaposition. Let’s say, a neutral facial expression, when paired with a coffin, was interpreted as sadness. When paired with food, as hunger. And when paired with a woman, as desire. The image itself was unchanged yet spectators consistently perceived different emotions. This proved that meaning is not fixed but produced through relational interpretation and that we, as viewers, play an active role in constructing meaning. This mirrors the fundamental claim of hermeneutics, meaning is not simply embedded by the author but arises through the interpretive encounter between text and viewer. The Kuleshov Effect thus functions as the formal cinematic engine that activates hermeneutic interpretation.

From the perspective of hermeneutics of recovery, we can notice how montage becomes a technical delivery system for authorial meaning. Editors deliberately design sequences to guide interpretation through sympathy, irony, or criticism that relies on cultural codes, historical symbolism and most importantly, editing logic. Scholars may interpret a montage as symbolising political despair or social trauma as they are engaging in hermeneutics of recovery grounded in the mechanics of editing. Moving to the perspective of hermeneutics, the Kuleshov Effect becomes even more powerful and dangerous. It makes us as viewers believe they are interpreting meaning naturally. In fact, as editing is what filmmakers would call it ‘an invisible tool’, editing silently programs perception. Ideology can be inserted without explicit dialogue. Imagine a woman’s face paired with domestic imagery, it reinforces traditional gender roles. A poor man paired with criminal imagery, leads to class based criminalisation. A colonial subject paired with chaos, it racialised disorder. Spectators feel the meaning before consciously recognising it

which explains why montage thus becomes one of the most effective tools for the unconscious transmission of ideology. Cognitive film theorists may emphasise conscious interpretation, yet the Kuleshov Effect strongly supports their view by demonstrating that spectators actively construct meaning through structured inference. It is safe to say that there is a contradicting lens that asserts hermeneutics of suspicion complicates this position that even conscious interpretation is shaped by ideological frameworks.

Sergei Eisenstein transformed montage into an explicitly ideological weapon. In his works *Film Form and The Film Sense*, Eisenstein argues that meaning arises through collision. He states that opposing images generate a third ideological meaning. Montage thus becomes a generator of conflict, or respectfully, a creator of political consciousness. Classical Hollywood continuity seeks to conceal cuts in order to preserve narrative illusion, but Eisenstein in contrast, sought to expose montage as a force of disruption and ideological awakening.

This ideological function of montage is further supported by *Christian Metz's semiotic theory of cinema (Grand Syntagma of Cinema)*. As Metz draws on Saussurean linguistics, he argues that cinema operates as a sign system or more precisely, individual images that function as paradigmatic units while montage forms the syntagmatic chain that generates meaning through order and combination. Spectators do not merely see films, but they read them and it then becomes a structured language of signs that demands interpretation.



Battleship Potemkin (1925) dir. Sergei Eisenstein

'The Odessa Steps scene/sequence'

Here, we will now refer to how these theoretical frameworks converge with extraordinary clarity in *Sergei Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin (1925)* particularly in the famous Odessa Steps sequence above. The massacre is constructed almost entirely through relational montage:

- Soldiers' boots descending,
- civilians fleeing,
- a screaming mother,
- a falling baby carriage, and
- shattered glasses.

However, we notice that not a single shot contains the meaning of oppression. But instead, terror, injustice and inhumanity are produced between the shots. Fear is not simply shown, but it is invisibly inferred. The same way how violence is not only depicted, but it is constructed within the spectator's mind. Which means, the audience thus becomes an active hermeneutic participant.

This film reflects the 1905 Russian uprising and encodes Bolshevik revolutionary ideology. Eisenstein's intent was to mobilise proletarian identification and to demonise Tsarist authority. Montage functions here as emotional pedagogy for revolutionary consciousness. The Odessa Steps sequence is allegorically a national myth in the making. Yet as we discussed, however, deeper ideological operations become visible when we view it from a suspicious perspective. A Marxist reading identifies the workers as moral clarity and the soldiers as mechanical oppression that transforms class struggle into visual rhythm. A feminist reading reveals that women appear as mourning mothers and victims, which are symbols of violated innocence rather than political agents. A Barthesian reading turns the falling baby carriage into a myth, which tells us that innocence is endangered and the state transformed into a child killing monster. In each case, it is to be abridged that ideology is made to feel morally and emotionally inevitable.